



Perform. Transform.

New York State
nystea
Theatre Education Association

Adam Shatraw
President
Kristie Farr
Vice President
Meghan Test
Secretary
Colleen Law-Tefft
Treasurer

Board of Trustees

Scott Eckers
Diana Gruninger
Regina Hartman
John Hines
Michael Limone
Amy Martin
Carlene O'Connor
Tony Ravinsky
Christine Spring
Dean Vallas

Hello wonderful NYSTEA people! Carlene O'Connor from Poughkeepsie here. It's finally May... The weather is getting nicer and summer is just around the corner... Or is it? As the school year winds down, sometimes it feels like the days get harder.

The kids are sweaty, crazy, and unfocused (and so am I). Michael Limone and I were brainstorming about what we need to hear about at this time of year- especially as Theater Teachers.. And we decided to share our methods for preventing (or handling) burn-out.

Here are some things that personally help me through the spring season. Is it an exhaustive list? Nope. Am I perfect at applying my own advice? Definitely not. Do I still get burnt out? Of course. But typing this up has actually helped me to refocus and recenter in this last push through June, so I hope reading it will help you too!

The Friday Desk Clean up

My desk is always a mess. Especially when a production is coming up. On Friday afternoons, when I can't wait to run out of the building, I try to stay for just an extra few minutes to clean up my desk. Sort through the papers, put all the pencils back in the cup, and put away that random prop that hasn't made its way back into storage. Sometimes I will also write myself a post-it note with a list of reminders of what to prioritize in the following week. With it all written down, I can forget about it over the weekend. Then, when I come in with a case of the Mondays, I start the week with a fresh workspace and an organized task list. It's like a gift to my near-future self.

Go Outside if Your School Allows

The kids want to be outside (and so do I), so I plan for lessons that utilize the natural outdoors. I do a puppetry unit with my advanced acting class and the first puppet we animate is a stick. We all go outside and look for sticks with some quirk and character. My production class learns about lighting in the spring, so that we can go outside and look at different textures of light. How does foliage create patterns on the ground or on an actor's face? Where can you find a hard edge or a soft edge?

Take it Easy on Yourself

I try to leave my scheduling fairly flexible in the spring to allow for "off-days." Sometimes, I'll throw out a Friday lesson and we'll return to some basic theatre games that the kids love. It's good for ensemble building and re-energizes the group. Toward the end of the year, I might throw on a classic movie musical. Taking a few days on a movie sometimes makes me feel like a "lazy teacher," but many kids have never seen these classics

and they are an important chapter of theatre history. You can always tack on an extension activity or discussion to make the movie-watching more educational. You'll appreciate the break and the kids will too.

Try Something Totally New

At this year's NYSTEA student conference, I attended a workshop on Jacques Lecoq's Seven Levels of Tension. I had never heard of this method and I found it fascinating. I did more research on Lecoq's work and discovered his exercises with the Neutral Mask. I had never taught masking before, but I thought my acting students could get really into it. So, I spent maybe 2-3 (nonconsecutive) hours of research, bought some cheap neutral masks on Amazon, and developed a new unit that would last about a week. Did I want to spend those hours reinventing the wheel when I had other already established units I could teach? No. But, honestly, when I take the time to get creative with lesson planning, that is when I feel most reinvigorated as a teacher. So, while it was more work on my end, I felt wonderful that week, watching my students try all-new exercises and discover new things through a curriculum that I had crafted. Don't do this with every class, every week, but it's fun to spice things up when the daily drag is getting to you.

Hey NYSTEA Members! It's me, Michael Limone. I love this list! Here's something I can add... from a current place of burn-out (not joking): This year has been a hard one, I feel, for theatre folks in particular. With the public feeling more and more empowered to criticize programs, show choices, casting choices, rehearsal commitments (I know this is the case on Long Island at least), it can be difficult to stay positive. Here's what I did the other day... I called my mentor. I was reflecting on who the person was who inspired me when I was young, and what qualities they possessed that I wanted for myself. I thought instantly of my high school Chorus Teacher, who eventually became my colleague and partner in the theater program for the first ten years of my career. She has recently retired, but we keep in close touch.

We reflected on what was good about "the old days", and what I could do to get back to the place where I was feeling joyful about things. I realized that part of what got me through the tough times and the burnout was the chance to make a difference in a child's life. For just about every show in my career, I can point to one or two students who were forever changed by the experience- maybe all of them were... but some stand out- you know what I mean? Those experiences used to be enough to get me through to the next year- the next show. It's tough for me now, being a District Coordinator, and separated from the kids. I don't get as much one on one interaction with the kids as I used to. However, just recognizing *that* helped me to see more clearly why I might be feeling this way.

We laughed about the old times, and she really cheered me up. My soul was fed by that conversation. That's the beauty of an organization like NYSTEA- right? We can lean on one another. So don't allow yourself to feel like you're all alone... reach out to another theatre teacher and let them know you are going *through* it! What's that old saying? ... "A joy shared is doubled, a sorrow shared is halved." At least we have each other!

Thanks for taking the time to read our letter!! We hope it brought you some relief! You are doing amazing work- keep it up!!!

Happy Spring,
Carlene O'Connor and Michael Limone